

Tough Questions on Smarter Balanced Assessment, Measured Progress and Testing

BACKGROUND

What is the Smarter Balanced consortium?

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) is a multi-state organization working together to develop next-generation assessments that accurately measure student progress toward college and career readiness. The Smarter Balanced assessment is a computer adaptive year-end assessment where each student's test is customized based on his or her performance throughout the test. The new assessment will be used for state and federal accountability purposes beginning in the 2014-2015 school year.

The Smarter Balanced system:

- Aligns with the Montana Common Core Standards in English language arts and mathematics;
- Focuses on supporting teachers' instructional practice and implementation of new standards;
- Provides a comprehensive reporting system on classroom practices and student progress for teachers, administrators, students and parents;
- Ensures every student is able to show what they know and can do to meet new standards; and
- Offers classroom formative assessment processes and tools as well as computer adaptive interim and summative assessments.

Montana is a governing state participant in the Smarter Balanced consortia, means representatives from our state participate in all Smarter Balanced decisions. More than 200 Montanans have participated in this effort at different levels as individuals—using their expertise to do everything from assisting in the development of test questions to setting cut scores.

Given the problems that Montana schools experienced with the testing, how reliable are the test results?

Montana is participating in a study that will help us understand how technical challenges some schools and students faced while taking the test may have affected students' performance.

We have confidence that the majority of students who took the test didn't experience interruptions or glitches.

That study is being done by the Center for Assessment, and will be paid for by Smarter Balanced. It will also include Nevada and North Dakota, which faced similar technical challenges.

Will OPI be able to use 2015 as the baseline, or will 2016 become the baseline for the SBAC test?

The results of that Center for Assessment study will help the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) determine if the 2015 test scores will become our baseline.

When will we get the test scores? What is the hold up?

The Office of Public Instruction expects to have test scores this fall. However, given the technical challenges some students faced in taking the test, Montana is participating in a study that will help us understand how those glitches may have affected students' performance.

We have confidence that the majority of students who took the test didn't experience interruptions or glitches.

That study is being done by the Center for Assessment, at no cost to Montana, and will also include Nevada and North Dakota.

Another reason test score data has been held up is because Montana's testing vendor, Measured Progress, is using an open-source platform that requires additional programming to move Montana's data into a data warehouse.

What happens to a school or district if the school/district doesn't meet the 95 percent participation threshold?

The U.S. Department of Education (USED) could choose to sanction Montana and other states that didn't reach the 95 percent participation threshold as required under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. OPI hasn't yet received guidance from USED on how it plans to proceed.

It has been Superintendent Denise Juneau's intention to hold schools harmless.

Other states have already started releasing preliminary test scores, including Idaho, Oregon and Washington. Each state shows low proficiency in ELA and even lower proficiency in Math. Why aren't kids doing better?

This is the first year of a brand-new test that is aligned to standards that began being implemented in Montana classrooms in 2011. The test is harder. It's more comprehensive. Unlike fill-in-the-bubble paper-pencil tests you may remember, students are now required to apply their knowledge in a way that more resembles real life. They're asked to think critically. They're asked to be fluent in concepts – that is to explain an idea inside and out.

As with any new test, we expect students' proficiency will only improve as they get more comfortable with the process.

This year marks the beginning of a new kind of student proficiency assessment. Montana, like most of the country, is creating a new baseline for measuring student success. This assessment is meant to compliment the work teachers already do to measure their students' progress.

How many students were able to participate in the SBAC assessment?

Out of 76,000 possible student test takers, more than 62,000 participated in the test. That's an 82 percent participation rate. That's a commendable participation rate given schools had the option to test. This tells us that school leaders and teachers want to learn from this new assessment.

About 15 percent of schools chose not to test.

Most schools chose to try and test as many students as possible, and our data reflects that.

How much has Montana paid to administer the SBAC test this year?

Montana will pay Measured Progress \$1.33 million this year for the 2015 Smarter Balanced assessment. OPI is in a five-year contract with Measured Progress worth \$6.62 million. That contract began Oct. 1, 2014.

Montana also paid the Smarter Balanced consortium \$727,000 in membership dues and test development. However, Smarter Balanced has given Montana a \$375,596 membership credit for a delay in the interim test, and for late delivery of the open-source platform.

It's important to note that the Smarter Balanced test, including summative, interim and formative assessments, costs less per-student than Montana's previous statewide assessment. The new test costs \$27 per student. Montana's previous test was \$32 per student.

Why are we paying that bill when the test rollout was so fraught with problems?

The Office of Public Instruction is weighing its options when it comes to our contract with Measured Progress.

As of July, the OPI has withheld payment to Measured Progress until the vendor delivers our student data.

The technical challenges we faced this year were a result of open-source software that our vendors used which was created by AIR (American Institutes for Research). During Montana's 2014 field test, we were able to use AIR's proprietary software, which worked flawlessly. However, the state couldn't afford AIR's multi-million-dollar price tag to use that proprietary software for the 2015 assessment. So, we contracted with Measured Progress and Smarter Balanced, who in turn contracted with AIR to use an open-source version of its proprietary software. That's what created the technical challenges – the conversion of data from AIR's open-source system into Measured Progress' system.

Other states have decided to leave the Smarter Balanced consortium, is Montana going to stay in the consortium?

The Office of Public Instruction is currently a member and governing-state participant with Smarter Balanced. The OPI isn't talking about leaving the consortium.

Montana's governing-state status means representatives from our state participate in all Smarter Balanced decisions. More than 200 Montanans have participated in this effort at different levels as individuals—using their expertise to do everything from assisting in the development of test questions to setting cut scores.

Montana educators from K-12 and higher education have participated in workgroups which address topics such as: item development, formative assessment practices leadership and professional learning, math assessment, ELA assessment, accessibility to assessment, and technology. Additionally, 173 schools participated in a pilot of the test in 2013, and all Montana schools participated in the field test in 2014.
